

AN ANTHOLOGY OF STUDENT ART AND WRITING

# FLIGHT

MT. SAN JACINTO COLLEGE  
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I'd like to cordially thank everyone involved in the making of this magazine: all the writers who contributed to this project and all the MSJC faculty members who provided funding to help our club get published. I'd also like to make two special shoutouts to Peyton Doull, who designed the beautiful cover illustration, and Professor Jacob Meiser, because without him our club would not have bloomed into fruition. Being a part of Flight Magazine has been an absolute delight for me, an outlet to share my creative side with a wide array of incredibly talented and passionate people. I've learned so much from my peers, and I couldn't be more grateful for how this club has allowed me to grow so much as a writer. So, I hope everyone who reads this magazine will fall in love with these poems and short stories just as much as I have. That being said, our magazine's duality of themes is hope and dread. The club has organized the magazine's progression to begin with what we collectively decided were the most uplifting pieces and end with the most harrowing. Get ready for a rollercoaster unlike any other; it's one long, long drop, a gradual descent into the depths of despair.

Tyler Schantz

**President of Flight Magazine Club**

## DRUMS OF KULA

By ISABELLA CALAC

Beneath the ocean's surface, where light struggles to reach and darkness clutches through the depths, Leilani Kawana moves like a ripple, her form pressed against the powerful back of her seadragon. Her tattoos glimmer with a luminescent blue, each intricate design pulsing in sync with the movements below her. They stretch across her arms and shoulders, wrapping against her dark, lean muscles with the ancient markings of her people—a constellation of untold stories. Fetu's sleek, scaled body shimmers with cobalt blue and emerald green hues just beneath her calloused hands, catching the faintest glimmers of light like twinkling gemstones. With effortless strength, his fins slice through the currents as he propels them toward the distant silhouette of a lone trader ship bobbing on the surface above, its hull outlined against the moonlight.

The ship is an unwelcome figure in the endless stretch of the ocean. It was a neighboring nation's ship, a small faction on the east, which belonged to the Modor Kingdom. The kingdom's name did little to frighten her; she had been sent here for one mission only, to intercept a rare dragon egg as a present to the future heir of the Asidian Empire, the nation which she worked under. From its decks, she could hear the sounds of celebration drift across

the water—boisterous laughter, the clanking of mugs, and the clapping of hands. The scent of mead, spiced and heavy, carries through the salt air, causing Leilani to stiffen. This was a celebration of joy, perhaps a feast of arrogance, the kind that only comes from men who believed they had tamed the wild.

With a silent signal, Fetu rises, his sleek head breaching the water in a silent ripple. As she silently approaches the hull, she hooks a line to the ship's side, climbing with ease, her bare feet silent on the wood. Shadows engulfed her as she slipped over the rail, gliding down the ship like a whisper. The celebration echoed from the ship's far side, loud and lively. She didn't need to worry; they'd be occupied all night in their ales. In the back of the ship, she spots an ornate chest glinting beneath layers of protective cloth.

She reaches it in a single breath, fingertips trailing over the intricately carved designs. The lid creaks as she lifts it, the noise swallowed by the howl of laughter, and there, nestled within, lies the mythical dragon egg, the gift for the prince. The egg is nothing like she's ever seen, its shell swirling with vibrant colors that rival even the luxurious colors of the palace's interior. As her fingertips skim its textured surface, she freezes. Something deep in her chest tightens—a whisper of recognition. Each

curve, each carved swirl in the shell's design, seems familiar. They're like the marks etched onto her skin, pieces of an almost-forgotten world woven into her tattoos, and the tapestries she vaguely remembers from childhood. This egg was more than just a gift; it was the mythical egg that was rumored to bring prosperity to wherever it hatches. A piece that the Empire seeks to control. Rage stirs beneath her calm. Sharp and relentless, as if it has been there all along, buried too deep to remember why. Her mind stirs with questions she can't quite place—images of a village, hands weaving baskets or tying knots along the edges of a sail. Life before the Empire. Yet, that wasn't her situation. Her hands knew no other shape than fists curled tightly around a dagger, swinging infinitely, finding its mark again and again.

Above, footsteps drummed loudly against the deck, dragging her back to the present. She straightens, her body instinctively snapping into the coiled stance of a hunter, a dragoon, a weapon forged and owned by the Asidian Empire. The egg, warm against her chest, is meant as a gift for the prince, she reminds herself—a symbol of prosperity the Empire claims. Yet with each heartbeat, the markings on her skin seem to burn like hollow reminders of a life that was once her own. Suddenly, a familiar figure appeared on the staircase, framed by the flickering lanterns. The dark armor catches the dim light, and once the

face comes into view, Leilani feels her heart twist.

Lira—her closest ally in the Empire's ranks, the one who had trained beside her and fought with her and shared quiet dreams of a better life—had known about the egg's location all along.

"Lira?" Leilani's voice was barely above a whisper. "Why are you here? I was sent alone." Her gaze darted, searching for an answer in Lira's unreadable blue eyes. "Did they...did they tell you to follow me?"

Lira's expression didn't shift, but there was a coldness in her gaze that made Leilani's stomach drop. "You know how this works," Lira said, her tone flat, but her expression winced just slightly. "Hand it over, Leilani. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Her pulse thunders in her ears. "Did you know all along?" Leilani's voice shook, but she forced herself to hold Lira's gaze, searching for any sign of the friend she'd once known. "You knew it would be here, didn't you? You followed me."

Lira's jaw tightened just for an instant before she stepped closer, her approach slow and cautious, as if she were approaching a wounded animal. "It's not about you, Leilani," she said, her voice softened by something like regret. "Or me. It's the Empire. We follow orders. We survive."

"Survive?" Leilani's voice was barely more than a breath, her eyes narrowing as she tried to piece together the fractured memories

stirring in her mind. The egg felt hot against her skin. “You’re telling me to forget and to let them take it?” Her voice broke. “Lira, I don’t even know what’s real anymore. We used to talk about changing things, remember? Back when we were just recruits.”

Lira paused, a flicker of hesitation crossing her pale face, yet it vanished as quickly as it came. “You don’t know Kula. You don’t know what the Empire saved you from.” She inched closer, standing over her now. “Forget the egg. Whatever romantic dream you think you’re chasing—it’s not real. This—” She motioned to their surroundings, to her own armored figure. “This is what’s real. The Empire and your job. Focus on you, Leilani. This job pays well, and if you go home, who would accept you?”

“Kula?” She repeats, her eyes wide. The name felt bitter on her tongue, like something forbidden. Fleeting memories flickered, stinging her eyes. Kula had been her home once. Yes—she was sure of it. The thought pulsed painfully through her, her grip tightening around the egg as if it alone could anchor her to that truth. For a moment, she feels the pull of Lira’s words—of the cool logic that has kept her alive all these years. The Empire had been her life for as long as she could remember. She had a place here. A purpose. She had survived, hadn’t she? The Empire had been her reality, her certainty.

But as she looked down at the egg, its surface alive with the familiar

carvings that glowed against her skin, she felt something yearning. The symbols seemed to speak—a whisper in a language that was both foreign and heartbreakingly familiar. A life, a home, a culture she’d been trained to forget, to erase. And yet, each line told a story she couldn’t remember—and she needed to forget once again. They’d faced death together once and saved each other more times than she could count. She’d trusted Lira like she’d trusted herself.

“Maybe you’re right, Lira.” Her voice came out small. “Maybe all I’ve ever been good for is following orders.”

A flicker of satisfaction flashed across Lira’s face, but it vanished when a sudden crash jarred the vessel, tilting it violently. The wood groaned in protest, and Leilani clutched the egg closer. The sky begins to darken, and General Euric’s ship looms, its black sails unfurling like the wings of a dragon. The ship slices through the water, and Fetu answers with a bone-deep roar that churns the waves, stirring the sea into a frenzy.

In that split second, her gaze snaps to the deck above as shadows flicker across the deck. The scent of iron replaces the earlier sweetness of the mead, and the laughter that once echoed across the water dies, replaced by a deadly clash of steel. Figures adorned in the dark armor of the Asidian Empire begin to flood the ship. An eerie silence follows,

and Leilani recognizes these men—they were her fellow enforcers, the very workforce she'd been a part of for years. Their intent is clear: seize the ship and secure the dragon egg.

Leilani's knuckles whitened as she turned to Lira, an almost desperate look piercing through her confusion. "Did you send them here, Lira?" Her brown eyes flashed, demanding answers. "Did you notify General Euric?"

"I had to, Leilani." She interrupts, her voice cracking. "You're a liability. I had to; I knew once you found out about the egg—you would never stay."

Her friend's words hit like a blade to the gut, twisting deeper than any wound she had ever known. "You had to?" She whispered, her voice trembling. "You knew what this would mean to me, and you still... you still called them?"

There was a flicker of something beneath her eyes, something that almost resembled regret. "You're not thinking clearly. This egg—it was a gift for the Empire. And you..." She hesitated, but her gaze turned steely. "You were always too tied to Kula, even if you didn't realize it."

Leilani's chest heaved, her heart pounding painfully. "I sacrificed everything for the Empire, Lira. I let them take everything from me—even you. And now... you're telling me I was always disposable to you?"

A brief shadow crossed Lira's face. "It's not like that," she whispered. "I didn't want it to come to this, but

the Empire comes first. It has to."

Leilani shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping her lips. "No, Lira, that's just it—you put them first. You always have. Even when it meant betraying me."

"It's not betrayal; it's survival." Lira inhaled sharply. "You've been part of this too. Don't act like you're any different."

"I know I've been part of it!" Leilani shot back, her voice rising. "I never wanted this! I did what I had to, just like you. But I'm done pretending that it's right." She felt the pulse of the egg beneath her hands—a steady, ancient rhythm that seemed to call her back to something real. "You wouldn't understand, would you? You've forgotten what it means to belong to something other than the Empire."

Lira's eyes hardened, and any amount of pity or regret had vanished within a single step. "Belong?" She spat. "What would Kula have given you, Leilani? A place to die? Wake up, Kula is gone! Nobody would accept you. To them, you're nothing but a coldhearted traitor."

Her gaze dropped to the egg, feeling the pull of something stronger. "Maybe Kula is gone," she said softly. "But it's still mine. And I'd rather fight for it than live another day being the Empire's pawn."

Lira's face twisted into unrecognizable anger. The soft, pale lines on her freckled face hardened. "Then you're a fool." She snarled, reaching for her sword. "You've chosen your

side, and I won't save you anymore."

Lira's eyes flash, and in a heart-beat, she lunges forward. But Fetu's massive body comes crashing down on the ship, his sleek form twisting to shield Leilani, the blade scraping against his armored scales with a harsh, metallic clang.

Lira staggered back, a wince crossing her features from the harsh impact. As she stumbled to regain footing, her voice rang out frantically. "Don't do this, Leilani! The Empire will hunt you. They'll kill you!"

Leilani's movements were a blur as she hoisted herself up on Fetu's back, one arm wrapped protectively around the egg. "Let them try." She responded through grated teeth. With a powerful leap, Fetu plunged into the ocean, carrying her away from the ship, from the Empire, and from the plea from her friend that was lost under the waves.

There's no room for regret now; her only thought is escape. As Fetu propels them through the dark water, Leilani clutches the egg even tighter, the warm pulse beating against her chest. She can hear the muffled sounds of shouting from above, the Empire's ship looming behind them, its shadows stretching across the seafloor. Spears pierce the water around her, slicing through the currents, each one narrowly missing her as she presses herself closer to Fetu's back. Yet, despite Fetu dodging, one spear manages to graze her shoulder, sending an agonizing flash

of pain down her arm. She bites back a cry, feeling a warm blood trail from the wound, swirling into the dark water.

The egg's glow intensifies, casting a soft light across the sand below. Symbols and markings she thought lost forever are suddenly revealed, etched into the seafloor. Ancient patterns of her people, guiding her forward like a path laid just for her. Her eyes widen as she realizes what's happening: the egg is leading her home. As they dive deeper, she feels the pressure of the water build and her lungs start to strain. But something remarkable happens—Fetu releases a surge of energy from his mouth in a gurgling roar, and she feels it settle over her, easing her chest as though the water itself grants her breath. It's not air exactly, but a sensation of peace, as though she's connected to Fetu's own breathing.

The ship's shadow begins to fade as she goes deeper into the sea, weaving through narrow passageways in the reef. The egg's light touches each marking in turn, revealing a route to somewhere hidden, somewhere untouched. The very sight stirs something within her, memories she snuffed a long time ago, whispers of her people's legends about a sanctuary beneath the waves. Fetu dives, following the path as if he knows it himself.

Finally, they emerge into an isolated lagoon surrounded by towering cliffs and dense foliage, untouched by the Empire's reach. The waters



are calm, illuminated by the soft glow of bioluminescent plants that echo the patterns of her tattoos. She slides off Fetu's back and wades to the shore, the egg still firmly cradled in her arms. The symbols from her skin and the seafloor are etched into the stones around her, as though the very land itself recognizes her. She's here, finally, at the place her people once called home.

A faint rustling breaks the stillness, and she tenses, instinctively raising the egg. But from the shadows of the cliffs, figures emerge, their eyes wide with disbelief. One of the men—a wiry elder with a ceremonial staff—steps out of the bushes, his face lined with suspicion as his eyes fix on the Asidian mark branded on her shoulder.

“Who are you?” he demands. “You wear the mark of the Empire. Have you come to finish us off?”

Leilani's heart sinks, realizing what she must look like to them. Fragments of the armor of their oppressors, her skin marked with the branding of the Empire, she knows she could be mistaken for just another enforcer sent to hunt the remains of Kula. “No, please,” she says, taking a step back. “I'm not here to hurt you. I was taken by the Empire and forced to serve them, but I'm not one of them. I was born in Kula—I'm one of you.”

More appear from the cliffside, and a crowd begins to form. One of the women, her face lined with black streaks on her chin, narrows her

eyes. “A true child of Kula wouldn't bear the Empire's mark. We've had spies before—traitors who claimed to be our kin. We're not so easily deceived.”

“Look!” she exclaims, holding up her arms to reveal the designs on her skin. “These markings were given to me as a child. The Empire branded me, yes, but they couldn't hide my tattoos. And I brought this.” She raises the egg for them to see, “To prove I am not who you think I am.”

The crowd falls silent, and the elder studies her closely. Slowly, he lowers his staff, though his eyes remain wary. “Then prove it,” he says. “If you truly carry the spirit of Kula, let the egg reveal it. Set it in the center of the stone pebbles.”

Leilani hesitates, glancing at the egg in her hands, feeling its pulse twitch beneath her fingers as if it were beckoning her to step forward. She kneels down to gently place the egg on the ground at the center of the stone pebbles. The crowd remains tense, more beginning to descend down the slope, all ages alike.

The lagoon falls into a heavy silence, broken only by the gentle lapping of the water against the shore. Her heart sinks as each second stretches, empty of any sign from the egg. She can feel their doubt—their silent accusations that she's an intruder. A flicker of panic rises within her, and she wonders, What if Kula's spirit has cast me aside? What if my years with the Empire have erased any claim I had here? Her hands

tremble as she clasps them together, the blood running down her fingers now. Please, she pleads, don't let me be a stranger here. Don't let them be right.

Just as her doubts threaten to consume her, she notices the faintest pulse from the egg—a subtle, almost hesitant beat beneath its shell. A murmur ripples through the crowd as the lagoon fills with the soft, radiant glow. Slowly, Leilani feels her fears fade, replaced by a warmth that seems to rise from the earth beneath her feet.

The elder descends, walking towards her with staggering steps. His voice, thick with emotion, trembles as he speaks. “Kula’s spirit has answered. With the egg returned to us, we will prosper once more.”

Leilani feels her eyes fill, her heart swelling with a deep sense of belonging she never thought she'd feel again. She looks down at her blood-streaked hands, the light of the egg washing over her wounds as if to soothe her.

Just then, Fetu stalks to her from the water's edge, his sleek form glistening in the egg's vibrant light. With a gentle, familiar nuzzle, he presses his head against her, a comforting presence that feels like an old friend.

The elder places a hand on her shoulder, his voice low but filled with pride. “You are no stranger here. You have brought our heart home.”

Her breath catches, and she manages a nod, too overwhelmed to speak. She glances out over the faces of her people, her kin, feeling the weight of their trust and belief. Then, a warm laugh bubbles up from her chest, unsteady at first, but it grows, spilling over as she wipes at the tears she hadn't realized were there. “I'm home.” She says, her voice clear and certain.

“Welcome home, child. There's much to re-learn.” The elder rests a hand on her shoulder before turning to Fetu, gently stroking his sleek muzzle.

Leilani glances around at the faces in the crowd, feeling their shared hope blossom through her, stronger than any memory of the Empire's grip. A quiet vow begins to form on her lip. With her people surrounding her and Fetu standing strong beside her, Leilani steps forward, no longer a wanderer or a soldier, but a leader. Kula is hers to reclaim, and together, they will bring their land back to its former glory.

**FORBEARANCE**  
**BY SARA HURTADO**

My one clear memory of you borders on fantasy  
Along with your promise to me  
As I caught my first shooting star at 6 years old

A twinkling grin tucked by your side  
I peeked out the window at a forbidden hour  
On that disgustingly khaki corduroy sofa  
Waiting with a quiet glimmer in my eyes  
And hanging onto your arm for all perpetuity

“When are you going to die, dad?”

Your laugh was like a firecracker at the thought  
The ravenous words of your sweet child  
Clutching your great chest  
“No, honey. That’s not going to happen. Not for a long, long time.”

In a sweet millisecond my small bony frame  
Is lifted skybound by your great cosmic hands  
A shooting star blooms across

Your eyes, the only piece of you I’ve kept with me

I wrap my pinky around that marvelous sight  
And never let go of that stubborn, aching star

# JEBEDIAH FINCH

By TYLER SCHANTZ

Jebediah Finch was convinced that either in a distant lifetime or in the afterlife, the woman of his dreams, his soulmate, would eagerly be waiting for him. How he stumbled upon this conclusion is unknown, whether it was something he read, was told, or reached himself. Every Saturday night (anywhere from 9 to 11 PM), a table for two would be reserved at Idle Todd's All-Out American Restaurant under Jebediah's name; he would be seen smiling chronically towards the other side of his booth with a strawberry milkshake almost perfectly centered on the table, which contained two straws huddled back-to-back. When questioned by one of his good friends about his weekly ritual, Jebediah replied with a bewildering yet intriguing statement: "It's mainly for practice, my dear friend. When I finally link with the woman I'm destined to be with, I'll have decades, possibly centuries, of experience under my belt, and I'll be able to make her the happiest woman to ever be." His friend, despite feeling morbidly engrossed in this answer, decided not to turn the eccentric man into a subject of gossip; it was the thousands of strangers who witnessed his incongruous behavior that spread word of his milkshake-sipping affairs.

Saturday nights became peak business hours for Idle Todd's; hundreds of people flocked to view the Jebedi-

ah Finch exhibit, with the restaurant owner capitalizing on this frenzy by enforcing a new rule: anyone within reasonable proximity of the building after five minutes time must purchase an item off the menu if they do not wish to be forcefully removed by security. Reworked policy did little to clear the hazardous walkways for roller-skating waitresses, and windows continued to be surrounded by those hoping to catch a quick glimpse of the eccentric milkshake man. Despite his sudden and axiomatic popularity, Jebediah was completely oblivious to the fact that he was the sole reason Idle Todd's was overly crowded and bustling every Saturday night; he never once noticed the hundreds of baffled eyes looking his way nor the excessive number of photos and videos capturing his practice dates.

While many would consider most oblique and idiosyncratic behavior as somewhat repulsive, Jebediah's handsome and riveting facial features, along with his tall, slender body, were enough for many men and women to begin obsessing over him, such to the degree of stalkerish behavior; the most infamous and fascinating case of this would have to be of Jennifer Smith. Like Jebediah, Jennifer was also on a quest for love, so to speak. Although once quite reserved, timid, even, she had reached a sort

of breaking point. Being completely desperate for a partner in crime, she became willing to do anything just to get the attention of anybody she felt could fulfill that role, constantly humiliating herself in front of crowds of strangers, in front of friends and acquaintances. One day she remembered Jebediah, the only person who had ever shown any romantic interest in her; unfortunately, this was all the way back in high school... In fact, he asked her to be his girlfriend during the midst of a mink dissection in their high school anatomy course; she rejected his unpredictable and naive approach. Now that Jebediah's popularity had reached unhealthy amounts, along with his appearance being much more conventionally attractive, Jennifer romanticized their brief awkward encounter; astonished at his transformation, she began to fall madly in love with the idea of being with him, sitting across from him and slurping a straw from his milkshake.

One night after another pre-established "date" at Idle Todd's, Jennifer, wanting to see Jebediah in the flesh, decided to drive to Idle Todd's before instinctively following her target home, with no concrete plan in mind, simply following the caliginous path of her thoughts. Unsuspecting and unassuming, Jebediah never once questioned the black vehicle riding in his wake and failed to take notice of the same car parking right across from his house as he slowly unlocked his door and proceeded inside.

Jennifer waited a few minutes before approaching the house and examining every possible entrance point; she decided to enter through the front door via lockpick. Once inside, she observed how tidy and organized Jebediah's house was, although rather ordinary and plain to the point of dullness. Every piece of furniture mirrored one another, whether through color scheme, brand, or both; all chairs were black, all tables were light brown, and each couch was the exact same model as the other. An attempt at some sort of infallibility? Or was there merely a sale on that specific item?

Jennifer peered into a half-open cupboard, gaining a glimpse of a bright white object; further investigation reveals a stash of white coffee mugs, around forty of them, all crammed together yet in a tidy, deliberate manner. Right beneath the cabinet, a small metal basket containing a myriad of colorful tea packets, flavors ranging from the generic "English Breakfast" and "Pure Peppermint" to the abstract "Wintertime Love" and "Good Day Sunshine". Out of pure intrigue, she made herself a cup of "The Black Angel's Death Song". "Oh my! How bitter indeed!"

Once she heard the shower turn on, Jennifer put down her mug and stealthily tiptoed towards the upstairs bathroom. Of course, Jebediah, being the person to least likely assume someone were to break into his house, left the bathroom door unlocked, and Jennifer slowly turned

the handle and screamed when she found him completely nude, posing in front of his bathroom mirror. Oddly, he didn't share her reaction of startlement. In fact, he was so nonchalant about his surprise visitor that she began to wonder if he knew about her plan (of course, this was false, but Jennifer never once considered that he likely would've left the door unlocked too if this were the case).

"Hey there! Let me ask you a question, if you don't mind, of course. Do you think my left bicep is slightly heftier than my right bicep? I try to make sure my arms are of equal proportion."

His muscles were nothing impressive but definitely evidence of a man attempting to bulk up in size.

Jennifer tried uttering a response but ended up fainting, a bemused, drooping daffodil on the second-floor carpet.

When she awoke, Jennifer found herself in a comfortable bed laced with white sheets, white blankets, and white pillows and pillowcases; it reminded her of Jebediah's cupboard. After a few minutes of taking in the sheer whiteness surrounding her, it was as if she finally came to her senses, a cleansing of sorts. But before she had much time to realize what she had just done, Jebediah gently opened the spare bedroom door and brought in a tray of ladyfingers soaked in sugar syrup and a cup of tea.

"I saw you helped yourself to a cup, so I made you another, same flavor and all." Jennifer gave a quaint smile and meek "thank you" before nibbling on a ladyfinger. Then, confusion arose within her.

"You're not gonna ask why I broke into your house?"

"Why should I? Besides, it did more harm to you than it did to me." He laughed in an almost jolly manner; Jennifer felt like she was conversing with Jesus, or Santa Claus, maybe. "You're not concerned that I picked your front door's lock, used your mug to drink one of your tea packets, and walked in on you naked in the bathroom?"

"Not at all! Visitors are welcome anytime! By the way, you never answered my question."

"Huh. What question?"

"Do you think my left bicep is bigger than my right one? It's important to me that both are the same size."

"I'd have to see them again, sorry." Jebediah rolled his sleeves upwards, flexing both of his biceps.

"They look fine to me," Jennifer replied, slightly pink.

"Great! Thanks for your examination!"

"Heh. Hey, Jebediah, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all! Pass me a ladyfinger, will ya?"

"I mean no hostility whatsoever when I ask this, but why are you... like this?"

"What do you mean?"

“Well, once again, no hostility intended; you’re bizarre. I mean, in high school you were also pretty weird, but now you’re... a complete eccentric,” laughing slightly. “We went to the same high school? Say, what’s your name?”

“Jennifer. Jennifer Smith.”  
Something about Jebediah, whether his face or his behavior, likely both, overtly changed once her name was revealed, something Jennifer caught on to.

“Oh my god... How did I not recognize you? I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. There’s no need to apologize.”

“Well, Jennifer, to tell you the truth, people lately have been calling me eccentric; hell, even my friends have, but it took you telling me for that fact to really sink in. I’d rather not delineate what I’ve been thinking about lately, but I’ll admit that I

feel as if I was quite erroneous.”

“That’s okay. We don’t have to get into it if you’d prefer not to.”

“You know, admittedly, you rejecting me all the way back in high school really had an effect on me.”

“Heh. Well, you couldn’t have asked me out at a more improper time. But I’m sorry that it affected you so heavily.”

Eventually, Jebediah led Jennifer out of his home, but before she could say goodbye... “Hey, do you want to go to Idle Todd’s next Saturday with me? I’ve never actually ordered anything there besides milkshakes.”

“That sounds quite nice!”

As Jennifer drove off, Jebediah waved excessively, likely because of how excited he was for next weekend. He walked back into his house, locked the door, and collapsed on the floor.

## THE GIFT OF LIFE BY AMELIE JENNINGS

Moist eyes blinking open, bones still soiled,  
icy cerebrum beginning to defrost.  
Two gifts are thrust upon her

One mimicking a tree  
Extends it's emaciated limbs in her direction  
The present threaded to its flank,  
with a string of fraying floss,  
Hangs just shy of her furthest reach  
So close her fingertips kiss the bloated wrapping.

Pursuing the first, the other,  
shape mimicking her form,  
Took to folding itself around her preoccupied anatomy  
Possessing initiative over her oxygen  
And constricting her lungs.  
Demanding attention

Palm applying pressure to her cervical  
The serrated air of, "You were made for me."  
Abrades her eardrum, and her own ability  
To pierce the ocean of noise around her  
Compels her to scream  
Perspiring dry chords and tightened skin

Such a noise requires the remnants of her spirit  
Nothing left to nourish the will she once had  
To know the weight of her first gift  
To seize it and tear it open  
And the ever weakening fiber cording it  
Continues it's operation on time, not empathy



Determined to bear a fruitful struggle  
To live with full, deep breaths  
Before breathing naught  
To taste nourishment void of skin, for once  
Her thrashing persists,  
A grueling lifetime  
And by the time  
Her throat is barren, a layer of dust  
Coating her entirely  
Gravity pulling her straining limbs back  
Toward the hot dirt  
By that time, her gift had loosened independently

Dropping square into the cradle of her embrace  
A familiar pressure estranges itself, and slips away  
insignificant to the beacon she now carries

Through a fog of exhaustion  
New fervency grasps her  
limbs. Tearing layered, meticulous ornament in search  
Of her answer  
In search of the mystery,  
Seeking the first birthright.

Bones half dissolved into the ground  
Aching mobility peeling back the final film.  
It propels any remaining moisture to her eyes  
This prospect of such a longing, dutifully fulfilled,  
Reveals the last time oxygen will serve her.  
Life, so hard earned, finally concludes.

Such a tumultuous existence, rendered its benevolence useless  
For a gift should not be hard wrought  
A real gift is a service. A reprieve. An end.

# THE BURNING BOAT

By SYDNEY COLE

The first time Malachi opened his eyes, he leapt from the flames and crashed into the waters beneath him, as his lungs struggled for a breath, and his arms and legs seized at the icy current. Something like hands, mere tendrils, reached for him, grasping his arms, legs, chest, throat. His lips formed 'round a scream, only to be met with a burst of bubbles and a trickling vice into his lungs.

His hand shot up, reaching for the surface, up and up and up—

The darkness held his wrist, and pulled him down gently into the ocean bed.

The second time Malachi opened his eyes, he shut them again tightly, and sat with the flames. They did not burn him, nor did they touch him.

One eyelid slid upwards, and then the next. Malachi rubbed the salt from his tear ducts, and stared at the flames around him.

He was sat in a wooden boat, barely big enough to hold his body. Fire ravaged the sides, the bottom, the front and back, yet it stayed afloat.

Rain poured down from the sky, canopied by angry, gray clouds, as if Malachi himself had grieved the expanse above. Little droplets like sapphires plopped into the waters, sending tiny spattering splashes all over the place.

*Pop, pop, pop.*

And despite the torrential down-

pour, the leaping flames resting upon the sides of the boat did little to douse its passion. Rather, the flames cracked higher, snapping and groaning with no wood to burn.

*Pop, pop, pop.*

And then, before Malachi could take another breath, a bird—a dove, telling by the whites of its wings and the delicate feathers, somehow untouched by the weather—burst through the expanse, as though to search for a shelter it would never find, because for as long as Malachi's eyes could see, there was no trees, no plants, no land, to be seen.

But perhaps, if he floated long enough, aimlessly and lazily through the rainy showers...

*Home*, formed well on his lips, a slight parting and a whisper of breath; a prayer, a devotion.

In his mind, he imagined following the bird as an emboldened flame leading its wayward people home through the night.

"Right," he said, with no one to hear. "I'm going home."

And so was the first day in his burning boat, and then the next, and the next, so on and so forth. Every morning, or what felt to be every morning (there may as well have been no time, only rain and fire and a too-small boat), the dove rushed past, serving as his only excitement.

Each morning, *Home*, whispered

across his soul.

And yet, by the 10th morning, the whisper grew quieter.

By the 20th morning, it was nothing more than a whisp of air.

By the 30th, it had gone still, and Malachi closed his eyes.

The third time Malachi opened his eyes it was the 40th morning, and he sat in a wooden boat, barely big enough to hold his body.

Rain poured down from the sky, canopied by angry, gray clouds, as if Malachi himself had grieved the expanse above. Little droplets like sapphires plopped into the waters, sending tiny spattering splashes all over the place.

*Pop, pop, pop.*

And yet, for the first time since the first morning, the boat's flames were completely quenched. Though, much like a candle wick, the wood showed signs of the burn, charred and blackened, as if a single touch might turn it to dust.

Malachi reached out, placing his index finger upon the bow.

And so it crumpled, like a sandcastle collapsing upon itself.

The wooden boat dissolved into the water below.

Malachi felt himself dissolve into the waters below.

And yet, before the final wave

pulled him under, completely and irreparably, for the final time, the dove he had seen so many mornings before, rushed through the rain. Its wings spread wide, above Malachi's drowning form, as if to umbrella him from the deluge above.

Before everything went dark, Malachi spotted something clenched in its feet—a little olive branch.

The dove seemed to speak then, the first clear word he had heard since he awoke in the burning boat.

“Malachi!” she called. The voice was familiar.

He plunged into the ocean, eyes sliding shut once more.

The fourth time Malachi opened his eyes, a slow chirp popped in his ear.

*Beep, beep, beep.*

His head lay against something soft, he shifted and the sheets crinkled beneath him. The smell of sanitizer assaulted his nose. The lights beamed a hot white.

A heart monitor, he thought lazily. A hospital.

He turned his head the other way at the sound of a woman calling his name once more, like the dove.

His eyes landed on his mother.

And an olive leaf hung from a gold chain 'round her neck.

# I-40 SR-64 US180

## BY PEYTON DOULL

"I'm so happy the semester is over. I'm so tired."

"You made it, though! And you only have one more to go, you're almost there."

Aza lets out a small laugh. She stares at the ceiling fan, spinning on low, and her eyes gloss over. She watches it slowly rotate, and with it she begins mixing together every negative and positive thought into one sentence.

"Finals were tough. I cried every day I didn't make art and I cried every day that I did."

"Do you want to talk about it? Let some stress out?" Aza's head rests on Bodie's lap. She turns the TV down, but not off. She places her hand on Aza's forehead and plays with her bangs as they talk.

"Would you ever call the cops on me?"

"No, but..." She thought about the last few months. Last week, Aza's car had been impounded. She was speeding aggressively on the freeway when she was pulled over, without license or proof of insurance. When Bodie picked her up from the police station, her face was of stone, and she answered no questions. Aza had been spinning out for a while, but for the past week, she seemed completely alien to Bodie. She cups Aza's face in her palm. Aza looks beyond her, pupils sliding to the floor. "What

exactly are you talking about? Did something happen?"

"Not for any reason, you wouldn't do that to me?" Aza rolls herself up and stretches her back gently. Repositioned on the couch, she sits on her legs and faces her.

"I wouldn't. Aza, are you doing alright? What's going on?"

"I've been wanting to leave town for a while. I'm tired of hiding, I'm tired of artistic agoraphobia. I want to run away. I'm tired of trying to capture the emotion, I just want to escape it."

"Sure, okay...Do you want to go somewhere? I'm not sure we can afford a European vacation or a cruise right now but, how about a road trip? We should plan it!"

"What do you think about the Grand Canyon?"

"The Grand Canyon?" Bodie smiles, wide, and lets out an unexpected hum of a laugh. She stretches her legs, pushing the coffee table forward. The half full cups and cans decorating the surface wobble. Bodie puts her hands on Aza's crossed legs, her fingers figure skating circles on her knees. "Are you sure you're alright? I just feel like you're..."

They hold eye contact through the sustained silence of the dropped comment. Both pairs of eyes flicker from left to right to read the other's expressions as some unspoken

dialogue. Eyes dance from eyebrows to chin, narrowing in on a flinch or betrayal of something unsaid. Aza puts up a wall, a callous look of defense, and Bodie scans for a familiar crease of skin in her partner's left lower lip.

"We could take the truck?" Aza winces, shrugs her shoulders. Her eyes fall to Bodie's hands on her knees.

"You're not telling me anything. You could start somewhere, anywhere. What happened last week?"

"Can I tell you in the car?" She pulls an uneven smile, and Bodie grabs her hands.



"Where are the keys?"

"Where are my keys?" Bodie echoes from their bedroom, through a mouth full of toothpaste. The faucet turns off. She spits before she replies, "They should be on the rack, are they missing?"

Aza undresses the coat rack, the unconventional catch-all that stands at the end of the thin hallway, behind the door. Between her own heavy purse, and underneath Bodie's last worn light blue sweater, hangs the lanyard with Aza's house key shaped like a cat, the studio key, and the broken truck key held together with glue and a zip tie. The keyring held an assortment of decorations: a small figurine of a man wearing a hotdog costume, pepper spray, and a fraying threaded bracelet

from an old boyfriend.

"Found them. Can I start the truck? Are you almost ready?" Aza opens the front door and hesitates. She turns to Bodie, who has just entered the living room.

"I know I just brushed my teeth, but I kind of want to make a sandwich right now."

"Seriously?" Aza closes the door.

"Yeah, but I'll make you something, too." She is now in the kitchen, opening every cabinet and drawer. She flicks the stove on and pulls out a pan. "Where's your cheese grater? I noticed you don't have cheese singles in the fridge."

"I'm not hungry,"

"Well, I'll make you something and you can eat it in the car when you are."



When Aza swings open the passenger car door, several empty energy cans cascade to the curb, fast food wrappers float to her feet.

"Sorry, I still have a lot of stuff in here..." Bodie groans when she opens both the driver and the back passenger door. She quickly pecks at the trash in the truck. "It's a mess right now, I don't want you to have to put your feet on all this. Hold on."

"I can help. Let's just take it all in." There lay an ancient skateboard wedged between the seats and the floor. A tennis racket blocked the back window. Sitting atop the back

passengers' seats were two large and opened cardboard boxes. This was all Bodie had left to unpack from her most recent move. The one on Aza's side is marked, "Heavy and fragile." When Aza lifts one of the folded wings, she sees her own face in the box. Inside are several books, picture frames, and canvases. At the very top rests an 8-inch square charcoal drawing, framed by an ornate silver design. The drawing is of herself as a teenager, age 17, and smiling. She does not linger over this image, taking the box in her arms and into her apartment. She drops the box at the front of the hallway and kicks herself when she hears something shatter. Bodie is out of ear shot, and Aza does not mention anything when she approaches with a box labeled "school stuff" in black marker. Bodie heaves the box on the kitchen counter with a grunt.

"Maybe this is a bad idea."

"What? Leaving the house?"

Bodie teases.

"..."



It is 1:12 PM. The sun is obscured under the shade of the metal canopy. Bodie fills up the trunk while Aza gets out for sugar and drinks.

She watches the other people at the gas station with alien scrutiny. She eyes their vehicles, their tires, their hubcaps. She thinks about the road, as some bizarre communal

space, and feels herself crashing. The pump clicks.

Bodie visits the ATM outside the gas station. Aza exits the station with a white plastic bag in her hand just as she finishes putting her cash withdrawal in the back pocket of her jeans. "I think we're finally ready to go somewhere."



"I'm pulling over. I have to go to the bathroom."

"Ugh, thank youuu. I've been holding it for 10 minutes."

"Why didn't you say anything? I would have stopped much earlier if you had."

Bodie hits the curb when she parks at the rest stop, her head following Aza already out of the car and running toward the bathroom. She eyes the only other car at the rest stop, an old, blue Honda accord with duct tape supporting the fender. The driver is absent. Bodie's palms light a spark of sweat on their surface, and she hastily follows Aza into the small, concrete building.

The building appears square from the outside, but stepping in she finds herself at the front of a never-ending hallway of bathroom stalls. There are four urinals

to the right of the entrance, and a wall of sinks to the left. There are no mirrors above the sink, instead there are etchings and engravings of T+J, A+S, and L+L. There are crude sharpie drawings, graffiti tags and scribbles. Written most legibly, in red ink, clean and fresh, is the message “Where is your God?”

“I’m at the end,” Aza calls back, and kicks her boot out from under the door. Bodie exhales and takes the stall next to her.

She sits down and notices too late, “Can you hand me toilet paper?”



“Have you seen Thelma and Louise?”

“HUH?” Between the wind, the hissing of the fussy radio, and the loud purr of the truck’s engine, conversation is futile. Jeff Buckley is dimly echoing through the car, and only the driver’s side windows are rolled down, creating a continuous deafening roar, thus ripping apart conversation and Jeff’s sweet hymns. The thrum of the uneven air pressures collapsing against each other make the vehicle into a vortex of negativity compressed energies. It makes quite the

unsettling chamber, but Bodie preferred to drive with buffeting sounds. She said they intercepted bad thoughts and cleaned them for her while she traveled. Aza thought it was annoying; it hurt her ears, but she didn’t ever complain.

Lilac Wine/ I feel unsteady/  
Like my Love/ Listen to me/ I cannot see clearly

“Thelma and Louise?”

The windows slowly roll themselves up, and Bodie takes her sunglasses off. The car takes a final breath before sealing them in an uncomfortable silence.

Listen to me/ I cannot see clearly/ Isn’t that she coming to me?/ Nearly here

“Are you kidding?” Eye contact, and a pause, she lets out an uncomfortable laugh. Left hand on the steering wheel, her right arm motions to the road, and falls to her lap. She lifts her palm again, this time to Aza. “I don’t have the energy to entertain this, really.”

“I dunno.” Aza puts her palms against the glass and drags the broken passenger window back down. She shrugs. “Haven’t seen it.”

Bodie’s eyebrows furrow aggressively, and she casts a sideways look at Aza. She scans her partner, reading her. She is miles

away, and certain in her connotations. What is said is understood. Laughing again, she makes crude gestures with her hands to exercise her confusion. “We watched it together a few months ago, I think? We watched it on my couch, no, we were in the bed. Oh, it doesn’t matter. I can’t really remember, but you had brought a DVD... That’s right. You came over for the weekend, remember? That was a few weeks before...I’m getting sidetracked. Anyway, the point is, you’ve seen it, I’m sure of it.”

“I really don’t think I have seen it, but if you say we watched it a few months ago, I guess I could trust you. What was it about? What happened at the end?”

“What happened at the end” Dumfounded, she recalls the film in a quick charade, miming the scenes, and she finishes with a slight bow of her head, turning to her audience for a reaction. Aza gives her an apathetic, small smile, and shakes her head.

*Isn’t that she, or am I just going crazy, dear?*

“Oh, come on. Are we really going on this trip without understanding the legends that came before us?”



The time is 4:42 in the afternoon. The beam of yellow white sunlight infiltrates through the car sunroof and traces Bodie’s sallow cheeks, patterning a refracted highway line that runs over her smile lines, ending at her chin. All of the windows are open. The air runs clear and fast, lifting up Aza’s hair and bangs. Despite this, she continues to fidget and fix them. The pattering of piano keys and a moody whistle, the intro of *The Stranger* by Billy Joel.

“How well do you know me?”

“We’re finally getting into it?”

She smiles. Bodie sucks on her gum for a moment, rolling the question over in her mouth. She is deadpan in her answer. “I know you. I see you more than you know. How are you going to interpret my response to your question?”

“It was just a stupid question, I’m sorry. I was just thinking about the song,” She takes a deep breath at the end of her sentence, and her hands in her lap are begging, knotted together.

“I know the song. He talks about how we all have “faces” we can put on for each other. How we mask our identity around certain groups of people. We think we know people, but all we know is the mask they show us, and



when they take the mask off and show us their face, it's like seeing a stranger."

Between them, Joel sings, "Though we share so many secrets/ There are some we never tell/ Why were you so surprised/ That you never saw the stranger? Did you ever let your lover/ See the stranger in yourself?"

Bodie clears her throat. "Well, how well do you know yourself?"



"I haven't changed my mind about keeping it."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine," Endless, infinite road. A glance at the gps. Imperceptible 50 miles, and more highway. A look out the window, and a purple desert. 7:30pm and a sick, raw feeling in the stomach. It could be attributed to the late lunch consisting of a handful of gummy clusters. It could be blamed on the inescapable conversation. It could be the pregnancy. "But, I wanted you to know. I know you'll wait to ask. You'll pretend it's not happening. I want you to be aware."

Aza mumbles something and tosses her attention out the win-

dow. She puts her elbow against the door and obscures her face. Her posture slouches and a storm cloud appears above her head. The weather is overcast and humid, the sun falls behind the horizon.

"We're almost out of Palm Desert. After that, there's nothing. For a while. Do you want to stop for anything before then? I'm thinking we stop once more, before we run out of gas. And, for the night, or at least for a few hours, I want to stop in Joshua Tree, and look at the stars."

She continues to avoid her gaze. The truck lurches under a pothole, forcing her body to respond for her. She sits completely upright, her spine rigid. Aza stares at her lap, her eyes unresponsive.

"You never talk to me. I don't get it. This is my life, and you're acting like it's hard for you? This is my life. I'm not asking for much—just your support. Why is that so hard? Does it scare you? I can't believe you sometimes."

Bodie pulls into a gas station and turns off the engine, going inside and leaving Aza to permeate in her own rejection. She buys a scratch lottery ticket, a KitKat, and pays for \$80 on pump 2. When she comes back to the car, Aza is asleep. She fills up the

truck and goes back into the gas station for her change. \$4.81. With the penny, she scratches off each circle to validate her false hopes.

*“For 54 miles, continue straight.”*

The road ahead of her stretches into nothing, the narrowing perspective makes her feel nauseous.

She turns the key in the engine.



Aza wakes up when Bodie begins off-roading. She pulls the truck off the road and into a clearing. She doesn't take them far before halting the truck and hesitantly turning to Aza for validation in her parking job, though parallel parking hardly matters in Joshua Tree. “Should I turn the headlights off?”

“Should the sun set? Turn the engine off. I can hold the keys if you don't have pockets.”

“Thanks. The blankets are behind the passenger seat, you can grab them on your side.”

“Here, let me help you up,” In the bed of the truck, Bodie has opened two Tommy Bahama beach chairs. She has a long metal flashlight in her hand that she places on the top of the car, facing the cacti landscape.

Aza adjusts a large, unfinished crochet blanket over their legs. She shivers. “It's cold.”

“The stars are out, though. Look,” Bodie takes Aza's hand in her own and their indexes point to the sky, together tracing the forms of constellations. She drops her arm and takes their embrace with it. They press their palms to each other for warmth. Aza pushes her bony knee into Bodie's.

“I wonder what it looks like when it snows.”

“Like a frozen oasis.”

“I bet the cacti make great snowmen.”

“Maybe it'll snow on our way back, who knows? Maybe it'll start snowing right now, you never know.”

“You could check the weather app.”

Bodie falls asleep in the Tommy Bahama chair at 11pm. She looks serene, her head is slightly tilted toward the open sky. Aza wraps the blanket around her and jumps down from the truck. She journeys half a mile directly straight, guided by nothing but moonlight. She is sure she has walked far enough when she finds herself at the feet of a large Joshua Tree. She unzips her sweater, and she wraps it around the shoulders of the cactus. She places the

garment loosely so that the wind may knock it free.

When the cactus body is clothed, Aza steps away. She wants to touch the cactus, to hug and embrace it. She crouches in the sand and looks up at the cactus. She thinks about Bodie thinking about things. She thinks about Bodie's mind, and body; changing and growing. She thinks about her own, quitting and shrinking, and grows tired. She thinks about the road, and looks up at the sky.

Aza sighs. She wants to be full of lightning, cactus pine needles, and gasoline. As she prays to the green monolith, a wisp of ultraviolet light explodes in the sky. An alien spaceship. A shooting, falling star.



Aza surveys the sky with Bodie by her side as her eyes slowly sink. The sky lightens, and deep purples begin showing premature signs of saturation. The eager sun was not to come up for several hours, though it obviously wanted to erupt now.

Anxiously, Aza shakes Bodie awake. She tells her they need to hit the road as soon as possible, beginning a story about what she

had seen in the sky that night. She claims to be the sole witness of a miraculous sighting, the only one to have seen a shooting, spinning, sparkling, streak of light. She says something about life in the stars, a solar existence. Bodie groggily mumbles along as they help each other fold up the massive blanket.

"It didn't snow last night." Aza sighs.

"Yeah, I figured it wouldn't. It's actually kind of warm right now," Bodie rolls down the driver's window. Aza complains and explains that the windows make a sound when you roll them down unevenly while she pulls down the passenger window. She reaches for the sunroof, and opens that too. Bodie pulls on to the road.

"In 24 miles, take exit 165 onto SR-64."

"We're almost there."



All in a second, there is an explosion of blue-white light. It comes from ahead, behind, and above. Bodie gasps and jerks the wheel to the right. The speedometer falls to 0mph. The light wraps around the car and hugs them, enveloping them in a fluorescent fire. And then the car begins to inch, not forward, but upward.

The beam of light begins to pull them in.

The GPS indicates they are on the I-40. They are 400 feet from the final turn into the park. Bodie grips the wheel, eyes wide, staring into the light projected through the windshield. She is unblinking, frozen, and beautifully illuminated. Aza tries to look out the window, but all that is visible is a thick veil of incandescence. As she focuses her eyes, she begins to see through the movement of light, and the car has left the ground. Aza's mind immediately forgoes logic the moment she understands the car is no longer in contact with the pavement.

"We're being abducted by aliens."

"Aliens?!"

The truck's headlights pierce the inside of the spaceship and illuminate textured ivory walls. Aza turns in her seat and looks behind them, and notes that the room leads into complete darkness. The walls are concave and bony, the floor is textured like the inside of a tin can. The reflected light seems to make everything wavy and uncertain.

Bodie locks the car doors and turns the radio and air conditioning unit off. The body of the car is silent,

spare the sonnet of anxiety: hyperventilation. Bodie puts her hands over her eyes and begins mumbling. Aza puts a hand on her knee but does not let her surveillance of the situation waver.

"I think you should put the car in reverse," Aza begins, pointing to the rearview mirror. Two humanoid figures, about 6 and a half feet tall, hesitate in the darkness. The headlights trace conjoined arms, embracing bodies sparkle under the halogen beams. They begin to approach the car. "Put it in reverse!"

Bodie switches gears and puts her foot to the gas, the pedal touches the floor. The car doesn't move, the engine screams. "Shit!"

The car is surrounded by the figures, hesitant in darkness. They face each other and communicate unspeakingly, their Eight-ball for eyes piercing through the driver's window. They peer in, inspecting Bodie and Aza with penetrating, gloomy stares. Their eyes are saucers of midnight obsidian, their faces oblong. Each alien has a unique mapping of features, with concave nose bridges and thin lips pursed together. Their cheeks are full, their skin is a pale pink. Fleshy and hairless, the aliens move homogenously. They are conjoined at the wrists but

possess their own bodies. Figures holding each other, an entanglement of unsure unearthly connection. Long fingers press to the glass, which vanishes under their contact. The alien grotesquely smiles.

Bodie passes out, Aza screams.



When Bodie awakes, she finds herself under inspection. Laying on a flat bed of onyx black rock, a pillar of light pierces her stomach from above. She looks up at the light and doesn't find the source. She feels the heat of the sun in her mouth, her body, and her feet. Everything that surrounds her is energy, is light. She feels radiant.

The air around her is sterile and damp, the temperature cool.

To her left is an unwavering Aza, sitting cross legged with a vacant expression. Bodie asks what's happened, what's happening, and Aza shakes her head. Her hands are clasped in prayer, and her mouth is tight and unquivering. On both sides of the rock sits a wide jury of aliens, all still with their little mouths open in "ohs". They watch and whisper to each other, they push and pull each other and fall over themselves. One little pink pair laughs,

making small chirping noises. Bodie sits up and they begin fussing louder. The light from above dims.

"What do you want from us? Why are we here?" Bodie's voice echoes in the ship. The aliens squeak back together, a gibberish of little pecks. A pair of the aliens by Bodie's feet step closer. They smile and shriek when the girls do not pull away. Placing their open hands on the rock, their voices translate into a warbled English.

"We came here to research the unknown. We are on an important science trip to uncover and understand the human experience." An alien next to Aza speaks, whose palm is glowing against the rock. She places her own next to the aliens, looking more at her own chewed up.

"I want to write a book about the existentialist feelings of being a human being," The one conjoined says firmly.

"We wish to study your species, selecting random specimens at random to scan the inner essence of yoursouls. We do not experiment in an unnatural manner; we do not wish to touch you. We are simply observers and watchers. We study behavior in its rawest form, collecting the data of your emotions. We've just con-

cluded the first test.”

“I feel awful,” Aza croaks, drawing her knees to her chest. Her eyes are cloudy, and her cheeks are salt streaked from evaporated tears. Bodie reaches out and puts a hand on her back. Aza drops her head against her shoulder.

The next few moments shift between time, and the light grows brighter, a saturated explosion of changing colors. Positioned under a microscope, Bodie does nothing but accept the shrinking and growing lights. She feels a disoriented rip in her body as her mind pulls away from it. The rhythm of the pulsing lights becomes a cadence for Bodie. She marches along with the tests, letting emotions of brief anger, joy, sadness, confusion, apathy, and hope wash over her. The lights dim for a few seeming hours, and everything feels spread thin. The conclusion of the experiments is apparent in the darkness, the

temperature of the air a humid yellow.

“We would like to deposit you back on your home terrain now. We have procured enough viable human information from these experiments. Are you comfortable with us leaving you now? We do not wish to harm you any longer.”



With their feet on the red dirt, they look up to the sky. Against the now midnight sky floats a white disk. The spaceship starkly resembles a massive human pelvis. Hovering above, the skeleton ship echoes to them a message of condolence before humming away, a comet dissolving into imagination. With a blinking signal, the car rolls back onto the highway and the aliens shrink into the stars.

*n.* 1. INFINITE OR UNENDING TIME  
BY AMELIE JENNINGS

I

A butterfly  
Sunshine-winged beauty, ever exploding star  
Will take its last, labored inhalations  
on the thicket lined pathway to my front door

'A butterfly!'  
Will leave my mouth, wonder unchanged with age  
Quaking half-flutters still enough to stun me  
Leave me still and staring

I'll let a butterfly,  
An ounce or two of frail formation,  
Fraction of a fraction of my size,  
Bow my neck and bring me to my knees

Head lowered to its height  
Fingertips impressing spirals on dew covered dirt  
Staring straight into black, moribund eyes  
I'll decide, to

Free him, yes, free him from the confines  
of our interminable fate  
Break him off a piece of my morale  
Hope to watch his pinion stiffen, send him, lifted, toward atmospheric azure

When one piece is not enough,  
I'll simply lend him another  
continue to watch him suffer  
Waiting, waiting for the moment he recovers.

And though he never will,  
Gently, still, I'll lift his flaccid frame,  
Until it tickles my careful palm,  
Elbow straight, arm stretched up toward heaven, his final flight.

2

I'll weep for him.  
Harsh, echoing outcries  
Drench him wet with my tears  
Soil his substance, blend it indistinguishably with the earth

Leave and return, leave and return  
Find upon my third,  
Shallow sprouting roots in his place  
An inch or so of skyward growth

And atop his unconventional grave, another,  
Moonshine-winged wonder, ever encircling star  
Resting its buoyant body  
astride the dew-speckled surface of His reincarnation

Offer me the past,  
A different forest, no solar no lunar wings  
Ask if id make the yellow sempiternal should I could  
solidify my contentment with the reminder that I cannot

Any evermore I dream  
Any deathless paradise  
Could never serve me immortality.  
The way tiny cyclical atoms promise To carry my  
exuberance to the very tip of past's expiration.

3

Under the black sheet of midnight  
Before I lay my head to rest  
I leave my window cracked,  
Let feather light beating wings break past the confines of my rem

There, in my molten half consciousness  
There, convex of my irises sliding along pink skin behind  
sealed lids, there, landing, tickling the tips of my ears,  
They'll whisper to me, words sweet enough to taste,  
"eternal, eternal, eternal."



## RED WOLF'S RANGE BY CALEB DE ARMOND

Red Wolf's Range is where I live  
Where few people are and few people visit  
The hills are aplenty and roll into null  
But houses are few and noise is illicit

Red Wolf's Range gets cold time to time  
Ice starts to fall just before winter  
The snow is soft and melts the next day  
Till the first comes around, and it starts to bite bitter

Red Wolf's Range is quite far away  
No matter which direction you choose to look  
Traders come slim and quickly turn back  
And the shillings they give can't repay what they took

Red Wolf's Range is where I was born  
My family and friends are from Gray Wolves' Den  
They hardly come back, "the trip is too much"  
But I'm fine on my own, I always have been

Red Wolf's Range has nothing new  
Everything here is battered and worn  
There's comfort here in these aged rotting things  
Though each day the memory grows torn

Red Wolf's Range isn't like her's  
Where the wool is like satin, the grain is like gold  
Her kulning serenades me to sleep on harsh nights  
For my wells have run dry, my sheep have grown old

Red Wolf's Range is getting worse and worse  
The grass is dying and foundations are crumbling  
The once gray skies are being blackened and ashen  
And maybe I'm mad, but I feel the earth rumbling

The truth is, I'm alone at Red Wolf's Range  
Population, one, and it's always been I  
It seems like this place was built to trap me  
If I can't break through, is this where I'll die?

For who placed me here, I've only one guess  
Despite what some say, He won't set me free  
Though there's never a response, I often ask Him  
"They say you love all, but do you hate me?"

Red Wolf's Range is where I live  
I cannot leave, I'm simply too scared  
There's only one place I can ever call home  
It's here, the cave no one has dared

## A “DATE”

BY HANNAH HARVEY

Shortly after I arrived, I saw Kimberly get out of her car as she started walking towards me. Escape rooms didn't seem like the best first date idea, but she had some coupons and offered to pay. She was weirdly insistent and claimed that it was foolish to waste coupons in this economy, so I ended up just agreeing to it anyway. As she approached the building, I waved and said, “Hi.” She was wearing a white t-shirt, white pants, and white sneakers.

“Hello,” she replied.

“Are you ready to escape a room?” I said. I cringed as I said that line. “Very.”

We walked in and she approached the front desk. The guy behind it was about our age, around early 20s. He seemed bored.

“Hey Chris! Is the haunted house one open yet?” She must've been a regular or something.

“Nah, still being repaired because of those stupid kids. They did a lot of damage, on opening day, no less” he replied.

“Ah, bummer. Is it still just the space one, then?”

“Yeah. Not many people have done that one. It's kinda lame.”

“Well, we'll take that one then.” She handed him the two coupons as he tapped the POS screen in front of him two times. He just tapped the center each time. After she paid — I

think, she never handed him a credit card — Chris started leading us to the escape room. There were two doors on each side of the hallway; the one on the right was closed off with caution tape and had a sign indicating biohazards. He led us to the door on the left side.

We walked through the door, and it locked behind us, which caused me to instinctually flinch. This is the only escape room I've done, so I still don't know if actually locking the door like that is normal. The room had poorly applied futuristic wallpaper on the walls and had a simple cement floor. There were fake windows with space wallpaper behind them to create the illusion that we were in space. Prison bars divided the room in half, and beyond the bars was a second door, which I assumed we would be leaving from. There was various space or sci-fi themed clutter on various surfaces throughout the room, some of which I swear I've seen at Spirit Halloween before, and others that were clearly didn't have the licensing required to use, including a lightsaber.

The Darth Vader theme started to play on the loudspeaker. This place is definitely going to get a cease and desist at some point. Chris began speaking on it, which was hard to hear since the music was so loud.

“Hello, rebels,” Chris said in a

monotone voice. “You have been captured by the evil empire for your rebellion against our purification of our universe. In 60 minutes you will be interrogated and likely executed unless you escape, which is impossible, unless you somehow find the 3 keys required to do so, but you won’t. Evil laughter.” The loudspeaker turned off.

“Is the plot to this escape room just Star Wars?” I asked Kimberly.

“Yes,” she replied. “Let’s start with the table over there.” She pointed to the table on the left side of the room, which had the previously mentioned lightsaber. We both approached it and started looking at the objects. Someone had left a box cutter on the table.

“So, do you have a job?” I asked, trying to make conversation. That’s one reason the escape room idea didn’t make much sense to me; you’re supposed to get to know each other on a first date, and it’s hard to make conversation in this kinda environment. “Yeah, I work here. That’s how I got the coupons.”

“Ah. Wouldn’t you know the puzzle already?”

“Nope!”

“Why?”

She paused for a moment. “It’s kinda new. I haven’t really seen it yet.” There was a moment of awkward silence as Kimberly inspected the items, and I mimicked her to seem like I was invested. I looked over at the corner of the room and saw an obnoxiously large bottle of

hydrogen peroxide in the corner. “I think everything on here is just junk,” she eventually said. “It might be like last time.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The last one in this room was really similar to this; it was prison themed. The manager didn’t want to take the time to design puzzles for multiple rooms, so he just made the prison one unsolvable in hopes that it would seem clever. We might just be trapped here for the next hour.”

“Oh.” I was secretly glad about this; it would mean we could just talk. “So, what happened in the other room?” I asked.

“Oh, some teenagers did a blood ritual,” she said, nonchalantly. “Oh?” At least that possibly explains the hydrogen peroxide.

“Yeah, that happens sometimes here, I think. They also broke stuff, and then they claimed it was the demons they summoned. Teenagers, am I right?” “Teenagers try to do blood rituals in this escape room regularly?” I asked. “Well, not in this one, just the other one. They don’t like this room as much.” “Is this a specific group of teenagers doing this?”

“God!” She suddenly shouted, “I don’t know! I’m new here! Stop asking so many questions!”

“Ok. I won’t.”

Kimberly turned away from the table, crossed her arms, and began tapping her foot. I heard the faint sound of speaking, and she turned away from me, grabbed the collar of

her shirt and spoke into it. I couldn't hear what she said, but she sounded annoyed.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing," she replied.

"I don't think it was."

"Would you stop asking me questions?"

"This is all very suspicious."

"How? Everything's according to plan."

"What plan? Why the hell is there a box cutter and a huge bottle of hydrogen peroxide? My dad watches *Dexter*; I know what those objects mean!" "What the hell is *Dexter*?"

Just after she said that, I heard some whirring of machinery and cracking, like plastic breaking, from the ceiling, and Kimberly muttered "finally." Two of the ceiling panels opened like doors, and I stepped backwards just before a large, brown, robotic bear with a top hat and a microphone crashed onto the ground where I was previously standing. I stared at the broken Freddy Fazbear for a minute.

"What's the plot of this escape room again?"

"Why aren't you scared?"

"I was before."

"Well, I'm plenty frightened," she said, crossing her arms.

"Okay," I said, not convinced, "do you think this is a clue?"

"Like I said, I don't know; I'm new here."

"I'm asking if you think this is to solve the puzzle."

"Oh. It's not."

"How do you know?"

"It just isn't, okay?"

"So you know that this isn't for the puzzle, definitively?"

"Yes."

"Do you at least know why this thing is in a space prison?" I asked, pointing to the Freddy Fazbear on the ground.

"He got arrested in space, obviously."

"Yeah, but why would Freddy Fazbear get arrested in space? Why would he be in space? He's a haunted pizzeria animatronic. He's kinda stuck on Earth." "I've never even heard of FNAF; I don't know what you're talking about." "I never mentioned Five Nights at Freddy's. Just the name of the bear." "Fine! Fine! You got us!"

"I'm not sure I did."

"You obviously found out that we're shooting the pilot for a prank show for Disney XD."

"I could not have possibly gotten any of that information from this alone. I thought you were trying to kill me."

"Now the pilot is ruined. You didn't even react correctly!"

"Why Disney XD?"

"They've done it before."

"This?" I said, pointing at the bear.

"Yes, it was called Walk the Prank."

"Yeah, sure, but has any prank show just consisted of scary objects falling from the ceiling?"

"Why are you insulting my craft?"

"I'm not trying to. I'm just really confused here."

"Well, stop."

"Why Freddy Fazbear?"

"Because he's scary and popular with the kids! Obviously! Would you stop asking so many questions? I need to get Chris to open the door."

She started calling his name into the microphone on her shirt collar. He wasn't responding. Then, I remembered something.

"Was the blood ritual thing part of the prank too?" I asked.

"No, that actually happened here," she said.

"Seriously? Does it happen frequently like you said?"

"Shut up, I'm trying to talk to

Chris."

"Jeez, fine."

He still wasn't answering.

"We may actually be trapped here," she said.

"Are you for real right now?" I replied.

"Yeah, he gets stoned on the job a lot. He's probably asleep or something."

We waited for about an hour, until some sounds came from the door on the other side of the prison bars. Slowly, some emo looking teens snuck in, all holding various witchcraft supplies. They let us out once we agreed not to stop them, and I drove home.

IN LOVING MEMORY, RLJ-4827  
BY KADEN REAMY

Her pupils are stunted by  
The shards of a window-  
A maze of interior furnishing.  
And amidst the confusion,  
Cup holders melt into cigarette lighters melt into dashboards-  
Wet dirt has filled the CD socket in your stereo.  
Your airbag lungs were too worn  
To expand a final breath of protection,  
Leaving her wrapped  
In a steel skeleton grave.  
Until the siren-hands disassemble your stomach  
And wrench her from your  
Seatbelt embrace.  
You've had your head flattened out,  
You're belly-up,  
Tires straining for Heaven,  
With gaskets, gears, intestines on display.  
And secured by the ambulance, she leaves behind  
Your slack-jawed face, missing a headlight,  
A carcass winking farewell  
Under the dripping leaves  
Of the poison oak veins.

## TINY DANCER

By SARA HURTADO

Through my many experiences with death and loss throughout my life, I've come to see grief like a mortician. I am given dead body after dead body and now I must find something to do with it; clean it up, put some makeup on it, take out the guts and blood, tuck it into a perfectly sized box. No matter how I do it, I have to get rid of it before the smell starts.

This wasn't always the feeling I had surrounding loss. When the first death happened, when my aunt passed away when I was five years old, I cut through it like a swimmer's hands and feet cut through water. It was similar the second time around, just three years later at eight years old when my dad suddenly died. Except that was the first time life had really changed for me, that I could feel what loss truly meant.

I remember the day he passed away more clearly than any other moment in my childhood and yet, I can only remember the end of that day, not when he or my mom dropped me off at school or any other last moment with my dad. It was a Friday, and my twin sister and I had just finished our after school soccer game. Worry had struck me then, possibly for the first time in my life, because our parents weren't there to cheer us on. That had never happened before. Instead, we saw our aunt and uncle for the first time in years, and they guided our

small, round, bodies clad in matching sequined pink and purple outfits to their truck. That was the first time I had heard the words "family emergency" and neither my sister nor I knew what to make of it. No one would tell us anything more than that, but it just reminded me of when my mom would cover our eyes at the movie theater when a particularly PG-13 scene came on screen. So we just sat patiently in the back, holding hands, believing that no matter what was wrong that everything would be alright.

We were then brought to my grandma's house to wait. Even at 22 years old I still call it "grandma's house," even though the condo actually belonged to both my grandma and my "Tia María" as we always called her. It was a small condo built in the 80s, one bedroom, one bathroom, and a tiny kitchen, all complete with popcorn ceilings, buckwheat carpets, and most importantly, crammed. In my childhood I never minded; I spent so many weekends at that place and all I cared about were the buttermilk pancakes my grandma made every morning, and the two tuxedo cats they kept that I could not wait to bother every visit. I especially did not mind on that particular May evening. All I wanted was to see my parents, to know what big emergency had happened— what avalanche or



earthquake or forest fire. Far later that night my mom finally arrived at my grandma's place, and we spent that entire night huddled together on their pullout bed, going through tissue box after tissue box. None of us slept.

The next weeks after that were the strangest of my life. I felt everything and yet nothing all at once; the rapid, extraordinary loss I had felt was far too big for my 2nd grade brain to understand, and truthfully, I didn't even begin to understand it until well into high school. Every part of my childhood began to change. My sister and I went to grandma's house almost every weekend. My mom began to lock herself in her room after dinner. My brother, freshly 18 at the time, started driving us to school and cooking us meals. At school, the kids all made condolence cards for us. They'd ask me what happened a little too eagerly, as if I had just come back from a vacation in the Bahamas. My sister and I, weirdly enough, liked

the attention, and parroted back a distorted version of the answer my mom had told us: "He got sick with all the diseases in the world!" We said it like he had won an EGOT, a very prestigious honor.

I remember during my first week back my teacher pulled up a chair at her desk, asking for me to talk with her.

"How are you feeling?," she asked me.

"I'm a little sad." I said. "He missed my soccer game."

Sometimes I wonder about how I coped with it all, how I swam rather than drowned. I went to a child therapist, dug myself deep into books of all genres. Sometimes I even let myself cry at night while listening to "Tiny Dancer" by Elton John, imagining myself to be the little ballerina in her pink tutu twirling en pointe on the music box he gave me.

I think that the answer is that I didn't.

**SIREN'S SONG**  
**BY MARY GRACE BUENO**

Most days when I look at you, I get lost in that endless sea in your eyes  
The misty sky coupled with the ocean  
crashing against the algae-covered cliffs and rocks.  
The sensation of earth's tears  
gently decorating my cheeks and eyelashes  
And the salty air crawling into my senses  
the aroma becoming stronger with each step I take to the shoreline

Other days when you look at me, I'm broken from my reverie of your eyes  
the shaded view is filled with the unknown the  
ocean slams violently against the once shining lighthouse now  
infected with rust and rot  
saltwater instantly floods my senses as  
you drag my writhing body past the shoreline  
filling my lungs  
drowning me  
until I no longer see the shore  
All I want to do is step back  
To look away.

## RETURN TO NATURE

BY GABRIEL LOZANO

Dear Dustin,

We understand why you chose to leave. The wild always called you, and you always sought it out. Since your days as a child sitting on the pavement watching the snails cross, you had an affinity for the real. Your fourth grade teacher came to us after you left with a parting gift: a succulent you had cut for her when you were promoted from her class. Her face solemn and her tears fertilizing the earth for you, just as you would have wanted. I tried to deny her gift, but she wouldn't let me. She expressed a guilt about your leaving, a guilt I think we all share.

These last months I find myself wandering the coast more. You were always eager to walk along that railroad, but I always insisted it was dangerous. Now I walk along that same railroad, much for the same reason. I feel what you must have felt that night, that longing, that aching for something more. I sit along the ridge, watching that golden glow behind the westward mountains. A symphony of crickets and frogs score my contemplation, a sound I've grown

fond of. If you had told me a year ago, I would have never seen myself here again. A remote and tranquil place uncommon in today's age, hidden a ways away from the roar of the I-9.

My love, is this what you longed for? The peace and assuredness of the natural? I watch the poppies stir in the pacific breeze and see you in them. Fuchsia clouds drape the heavens, a sight I pray is shared with you. I feel your presence in moments like these, when the sun goes down and starlight blossoms in the half-dark sky. Every constellation seems to spell your name.

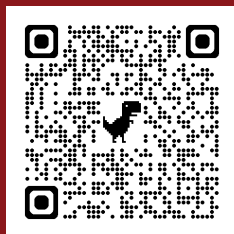
Among the waters I sit as they carry with them my longing for you. I pray my calling is heard, and that you may return to our home someday soon. As time passes, I feel myself eroding, the last fragments of my soul carried by the wind to the heavens. Should I leave this life, may the stars above be my eyes and the moon my image, forever guiding you through the darkness of the world.

I hope to see you again.

Mom

Cover by Peyton Doull

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